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AUTHOR Troutt, Eileen; Isberner, Fred
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ABSTRACT

Today's graduating technical students need more than a sound technical education to obtain personally and professionally rewarding employment; they also need job search skills to compete successfully in the job market. To address this need, a course called "Professional Development" at Southern Illinois University's College of Technical Careers takes students through the job search process. Course objectives include the following: (1) identify and apply career decision-making skills; (2) develop a list of employer contacts and sources of employer information; (3) prepare a resume and cover letter; (4) identify job acquisition and interview skills; (5) identify interpersonal skills used in interviewing; (6) identify professional development activities to maintain and improve skills; and (7) identify and apply a professional code of ethics. A survey of 98 junior and senior technical students was conducted, using a Likert scale, to determine how useful students found the course. The topics of resumes, cover letters, and interviewing were highly rated as useful; however, the topics of compensation packages, psychological inventories, drug testing, job satisfaction, and self-appraisal of abilities were rated less useful than expected. The survey will be conducted again using graduates of the program who have obtained employment, rather than students as they complete the course. (KC)

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JOB ORIENTATION: A COURSE USEFUL TO ALL TECHNICAL STUDENTS

A Presentation to the

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by

Eileen Troutt, Ph.D., and Fred Isberner, Ph.D.

College of Technical Careers

Southern Illinois University

Carbondale, Illinois 62901

(618) 453-8898

CE052778

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JOB ORIENTATION:

A COURSE USEFUL FOR ALL TECHNICAL STUDENTS

by

E. D. Troutt-Ervin, Ph.D.
Division of Advanced Technical Studies
College of Technical Careers
Southern Illinois University at Carbondale

F. R. Isberner, Ph.D.
Division of Advanced Technical Studies
College of Technical Careers
Southern Illinois University at Carbondale

Presented at:

25th National Conference
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JOB ORIENTATION:
A COURSE USEFUL FOR ALL TECHNICAL STUDENTS

ABSTRACT

Today's graduating technical students need more than a sound technical education to obtain personally and professionally rewarding employment; they also need job search skills to successfully compete in today's competitive job market. This paper addresses the problem of inadequate job search strategies and briefly describes a three credit hour course which prepares graduating bachelor's degree technical students for their job searches and job maintenance activities. Course topics are described and the results of a student survey are presented. The topics of resumes, cover letters, and interviewing were highly rated as useful; however, the topics of compensation packages, psychological inventories, drug testing, job satisfaction, and self-appraisal of abilities were rated less useful than expected.

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JOB ORIENTATION:
A COURSE USEFUL FOR ALL TECHNICAL STUDENTS

Many well–educated and technically capable people at all career levels fail to obtain suitable employment and promotions because they lack training and knowledge in job search skills (Levitt, 1985). To obtain the better jobs in their chosen fields, today's graduating technical students need more than a sound technical background and a mere few hours devoted to the job search. The emotional roller coaster of anticipation and rejection in a job search can weaken an applicant's self–confidence, resulting in accepting underemployment or compromising personal and professional goals (Wegmann, Chapman and Johnson, 1985). Developing the skills to compete successfully in today's job market is left, unfortunately, as a subordinate objective in many technical programs of study.

Review of Literature

Taylor (1984) surveyed 118 business students before and after they had begun their job search and found most were unaware of the time and cost of an extensive job search. In retrospect, students would have used more job search strategies had they known how to access them (i.e., the college placement office, private and public employment services). Those using the college placement office reported the highest number of second interviews and job offers. Taylor concluded that students need to know how to use a wide range of sources to access the hidden job market. Taylor encouraged professionals to advise students about a) pursuing resources, b) developing good interviewing skills, c) and researching a company and industry as important steps in the job search process.

Based upon a national survey of 243 college students, Dzubow (1985) concluded that students can significantly increase their marketability by learning basic skills in researching a company and preparing for an interview. Thirty–five percent of

those surveyed had not read any books nor attended any seminars on the job search. The top four job search problems exhibited by college students were:

1. no real interest in employer or industry,
2. not prepared for interview,
3. limited knowledge/experience in field, and
4. lack of career goal planning.

Forty percent of these students thought it would take less than two months to find a job, and 15 percent thought they could find employment in less than one month. Only 10 percent thought finding a job would take more than six months. Dzubow also found those surveyed to be deficient in knowledge of the hidden job market, aggressive job search strategies, and self–presentation skills.

In a survey of 86 business students before and four months after initiating a job search, Ellis and Taylor (1983) reported a relationship between job search and self–esteem. Students with lower self–esteem scores were inclined to use passive job search strategies that minimized personal contact with employers (i.e., contact by mail); whereas, those with higher self–esteem scores more frequently reported active strategies involving direct contact with employers (i.e., face to face). Those with higher self–esteem received higher ratings on interview performance, were offered more jobs, and more frequently accepted jobs prior to graduation. Ellis and Taylor recommended job orientation programs that strengthen job search skills and build self–confidence in using those skills in the job search process.

Murphy and Jenks (1983) interviewed 48 randomly selected San Francisco Bay area employers to identify traits of the successful entry–level professional applicant. Employers were asked to state the required skills for successful job performance, which Murphy and Jenks then categorized as adaptive, functional, and technical. Adaptive skills referred to personality, attitude, motivation, presentation of self, and tactfulness. Functional skills referred to oral and written communication,

organization, problem solving, and research. Technical skills were given little importance, and most employers reported that the determining factors in hiring decisions were adaptive and functional skills. Their suggestions for students preparing for employment interviews included:

1. Improve non-technical skills.
2. Improve job search and self-presentation skills.
3. Define career goals in terms of current and projected job market trends.
4. Develop an awareness of the demands of the workplace.
5. Practice applying skills through internships and work experience.
6. Take a few business-oriented courses.

According to Ashley, Faddis, and Kurth (1986), students entering the job market today must be prepared to adapt to the stresses of an unpredictable career. Most of today's graduates will choose, or be forced to make, several career changes in order to adapt to future technological advances. To do so, they must be prepared with skills and resources to adjust to career transitions. Ashley, Faddis, and Kurth call upon career development professionals to help today's students prepare for these changes. Bolles (1986) described job seeking as a repeated behavior, as he estimates the average length of a job in America to be 3.8 years. Kimeldorf (1986) comments that too little time is spent on the basic skill of job finding. Few students (less than 15 percent) find employment by traditional means of answering ads and working with employment agencies, and they need direction (Lathrop, 1977, p.22). Therefore, today's students need comprehensive job search skills to survive in tomorrow's labor market.

This paper addresses the job search strategies outlined in a course entitled Professional Development at Southern Illinois University's College of Technical Careers (SIUC/CTC). The paper briefly describes the course and presents the results

of a survey conducted to determine how useful the course and its content were in preparing SIUC's advanced technical students for their job search.

Course Description

The Professional Development course prepares students to secure and maintain employment suitable to their professional and personal goals and aspirations. The course perspective is that technical students will need employment skills to remain competitive in their respective fields. This requires that students set realistic professional goals, acquire adequate progressive job search skills and develop self–confidence to overcome emotional peaks and valleys inherent in the job search process. Specific course objectives and percent of time devoted to each area are as follows:

OBJECTIVE	TIME
1. Identify and apply career decision–making skills.	10%
2. Develop a list of employer contacts and sources of employer information.	10%
3. Prepare a resume and letter of transmittal.	15%
4. Identify job acquisition and interview skills.	30%
5. Identify interpersonal skills used in interviewing, maintaining a job, and gaining promotions.	10%
6. Identify professional development activities to maintain and improve technical and professional skills.	15%
7. Identify and apply an appropriate professional code of ethics.	10%

(The above objectives are listed in order of presentation in course.)

A sample of course topics includes personal inventories, communication skills, assertiveness, ethical issues, employment tests, resumes, application letters, references, interviewing techniques, placement services, employment agencies, and ongoing professional development. Through a variety of instructional techniques that provide information, modeling, and practice, students develop confidence using employment skills and applying the information provided in the course.

For example, in a videotaped interview classmates require students to draw upon information provided and skills taught in the course. Students also must submit a letter and resume to a panel of peers conducting the interview. In addition to good form and appearance, the letter and resume both must reflect that the applicant has researched the company and position sought. For the actual interview, students must answer a variety of questions related to their career goals, personal strengths and weaknesses, plans for future professional development, or their ability to handle an ethical conflict with a colleague. In the mock interview, students must demonstrate a knowledge of the company, its product or service, financial condition, and plans for the future. Knowledge of industry trends and new technological developments, as reported in professional and technical journals, must be incorporated into answers to interview questions. The student must also demonstrate a knowledge of the interview process, appropriate dress, and language skills. Thus, through a simulated interview, students demonstrate their level of professional development, which reflects how well they have achieved course objectives.

Method

A survey was developed to determine how useful students felt the Professional Development course was in preparing them for their job searches. The instructor administered a Likert–type instrument in each class at the end of the term.

Students were asked to rate the content areas offered in the course as "very important," "important," or "not important" in helping them to find or keep a job. The topics in the course were then rank–ordered as to their rated usefulness in the job search. See Table I for the list of topics included.

Insert Table 1 about here

Subjects were 98 junior or senior technical students ranging in age from 21 to 47 years with a mean age of 24; 73 percent were male. These students were pursuing their Bachelor of Science (B.S.) degree from the Advanced Technical Studies Division, College of Technical Careers, SIUC, which grants a B.S. degree in four areas: Aviation Management, Electronics Management, Health Care Management, and Advanced Technical Studies. Students in all four bachelor degree programs have completed an associate degree, or technical equivalent, in the following areas: Aviation Maintenance Technology, Avionics Technology, Flight, Electronics Technology, Automotive Technology, Construction Technology, Mortuary Science, Radiologic Technology, Dental Technology, Dental Hygiene, Respiratory Therapy, Physical Therapy Assistant, Office Systems and Specialities, Law Enforcement, Tool and Manufacturing Technology, Architectural Technology, Interior Design, Commercial Graphics Design, Computer Information Processing, or Photographic Production Technology. As part of their junior/senior coursework, they are required to take 12 credit hours, or four of the five division core courses. Professional Development, one of these optional core courses, is the one most frequently selected by students.

The survey was administered to students in five different sections of the Professional Development course in May, 1987. All students attending class on this date completed the questionnaire. In a few cases where students did not rate a

particular curricular item, the sample size was lowered for that item. On "ethics," for example, two of the 98 students did not answer that item; so, to compute the average rating the calculated score was divided by 96 versus 98. After an average rating was calculated for each curricular item, ratings were rank ordered. Four different instructors taught the five sections of the course from the same master syllabus.

Results

On surveying the 98 students as to how helpful they felt the course would be overall in assisting them in obtaining employment, 70 percent (67) said it was "very helpful" and 30 percent (29) said it was "somewhat helpful." None chose the "not helpful" response.

The 98 subjects also rated each of the 23 curricular items within the Professional Development course as "very important," "important," and "not important," respectively. Average values were calculated for each curricular item and then the items were rank ordered, (see Table I). Curricular items receiving the highest ratings were, in order: resume writing, cover letter writing, job interviewing principles, job interviewing practice and job search process. Conversely, rated as least important were drug testing, adjusting to work, psychological inventories, and compensation packages. Students were also asked to add any other topics they felt should be included in the course; however, none were added.

Discussion

Results from the questionnaire and comments on course evaluations confirm the importance of the Professional Development course to students. The authors feel there is strong evidence that this type of course is important in technical programs as students prepare to find employment commensurate with their abilities and

training. All too often, technical students receive only a few hours of instruction from college placement personnel or perhaps attend only a one-hour seminar. Understandably, many technical program directors feel that, because so much technical knowledge needs to be taught, there is not time for "extras," such as a job orientation course. However, a 1986 survey of representatives of private business and industry in Colorado Springs revealed that an estimated 85 percent of all people fired are terminated not because they lack technical knowledge, but because they lack human-relations skills. (Bailey & Klinsing, 1988.) Furthermore, the best positions are often obtained by the most skillful job seekers, not necessarily the best technically qualified applicants. In the College of Technical Careers at SIUC, students receive excellent technical training, but also learn job search skills, interpersonal skills, and communication skills. A substantial amount of time is needed, such as a three credit hour course, to prepare students for job search and maintenance activities.

All the curricular items listed in Table I were important enough to be included in our Professional Development course; however, the rankings by the students provided insight as to which topics were critical. Students ranked resumes, cover letters, and interviewing high. In fact, none of the students listed these as "not important." Sizeable amounts of time are devoted to these highly ranked topics. Interpersonal skills, communication styles, listening skills, and motivational factors also ranked high. These topics, in the context of this course, are taught in terms of the interview and supervisor/worker or worker/co-worker relationships. These survey results validate the inclusion of these applied principles.

Certain topics were ranked low, namely: compensation packages, psychological inventories, drug testing, job satisfaction, and self-appraisal of abilities. While these were quite important topics, the lower rankings reflect that

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students are not as convinced that these topics are important, or will be important, in their job search.

This survey will be replicated by the researchers and will use as respondents graduates of the division who have obtained employment, rather than students as they complete the course. The survey instrument will be expanded to include how graduates found their jobs and the duration of their job searches. These results will be analyzed by technological background and sex of the graduates.

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TABLE I

Order of Importance of Curricular Topics as Evaluated by Students in Professional Development Course

*Rank	Curricular Topic	#Rating Value
1	Resume writing	2.959
2	Cover letter writing	2.898
3	Job interview principles	2.847
4	Job interview practice	2.776
5	Job search process	2.765
6	Professionalism	2.531
7	Communication styles	2.436
8	Interpersonal skills	2.435
9	Listening skills	2.430
10	Supervisor/worker interactions	2.398
11	Job market trends	2.381
12	Motivational factors	2.376
13	Current issues in career	2.344
14	Ethics	2.333
15	Listing potential employers	2.329
16	Self appraisal of abilities	2.301
17	Job satisfaction	2.280
18	Assertiveness training	2.226
19	Living/working conditions	2.168
20	Compensation packages	2.165
21	Psychological inventories	2.098
22	Adjusting to work	2.069
23	Drug testing	1.928

* **Rank of 1 indicates topic receiving highest rating of importance.**
\# **"Very important" was rated as 3; "important" as 2; and "not important" as 1.**

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